**Report on Friends General Conference 2018 - “The Power of Truth”**

It might be the power of suggestion, but I’ve noticed that for each of the two FGC Gathering’s I’ve attended - first in 2017 and again this year, the the themes have been apt descriptions of my particular experiences of them.

In 2017 the theme was “Ripples start where Spirit Moves”. In the workshop I attended - “Opening to the Heart of Worship”, led by Christopher Sammond, I experienced openings which played out in the friendships I made during the rest of the Gathering. These connections led to an enrolment in a year-long Nurturing Faithfulness program at Woolman Hill, Massachusetts, which in turn led to a deepened and more active relationship with my home meeting, and an application for Membership.

In 2018 I hesitated to register for the Gathering, considering that I would also be attending Canadian Yearly Meeting this year. I was also concerned that I would be disappointed - that it would not be the same as it was the year before. After a few “nudges” from individuals in my Meeting I decided to attend again. I went carefully, taking care to maintain openness in spite of my expectations.

**Workshop - “Primitive Quakerism Revived”, led by Paul Buckley**

The theme of this year’s Gathering was “The Power of Truth”. My workshop - “Primitive Quakerism Revived” led by Paul Buckley, was very different from the previous year’s. There was time for personal engagement, but unlike last year’s workshop where the emphasis was on the use of the “heart, as an instrument of spiritual perception”, the focus was scholarly.

We studied narratives of the ancient and recent histories of our faith. Cycles of apostasy and revival were discussed - cyclical patterns in the expressions of faith within the communities of the ancient kingdoms of Israel, the 2000 years of Christendom and the near 400 years of the Quaker tradition. Forms of religion, adopted by communities, codified, idolized, and then overturned again in attempts to revive authentic faith.

Focusing on our tradition specifically, Friends’ use of the term “Light” was traced. The use of the term has changed. Many of the ways Friends use the term today are metaphorical, but for early Friends, the Inward Light was a real thing, a real spiritual substance. It was not a metaphor. By “standing still in the Light” one would, despite perception of spiritual darkness and sin, become aware of a greater reality which would overcome it.

It was also noted that the change in Friends’ use of the term has corresponded with changes in the scientific understanding of the physical phenomenon of light. In the 17th century, the scientific understanding of light and darkness was one of two separate, opposite substances.

I considered whether this shift in perception was a detriment or a gain. It is true that my experience of Meeting for Worship can make feelings of inadequacy, worry and guilt seem insubstantial. However, it is also true that my experience of spiritual growth has involved a recognition that there are parts of myself that are not as easily known as the parts that I, and those who are acquainted with me, tend to appreciate. I can imagine that early Friends’ communal experience of the Inner Light exposing and overcoming their own “sinful nature” would require a great deal of trust within their communities. It also makes me wonder about about the relationships between “inward” and “outward” awareness. I wonder if, in the mix of ideological and physical conflict with their fellow civilians, early Friends became capable of a spiritual awareness that is rare in the history of spiritual community.

There was also discussion around the history of Quakers and social action. 270 years ago, Quakers had substantial political and economic influence in 4 colonies out of 13 in the United States - considerably more than their numbers justified. Shortly thereafter, Quaker political activity declined in response to a shift in understanding of what it means to witness faithfully. Quaker communities came to believe that political support integrated the responsibility of constituents with the decision-making power the elected individuals, and that the integrity of this stance was not sustainable. Although there were still some Quakers who were politically active (and Friends continued to lobby, especially for the abolition of slavery), most Quakers did not vote.

I wondered whether this withdrawal could be considered a negative consequence of an excessive emphasis on the value of principles, or as a more authentic form of witness. It also occured to me that while this striving for integrity may not have been visible to the wider secular community, it would likely have more direct, and perhaps seminal consequences within spiritual community.

The activity and purpose of spiritual community was a topic that stood out for me in the workshop. The benefits of diversity within community were highlighted. The metaphor used for a healthy spiritual community was that of a meadow, the purposes and activities of which are varied and even mysterious, as compared to that of a mono crop, which has a clear and attainable purpose, and is also susceptible to annihilation by a singular blight.

Considering the work of the individual within community, the metaphor of leaven was discussed; love as the “enzyme” which makes it possible for the “bread” of community to rise. It was noted that each grain of yeast breathes out individually, without awareness of a collective purpose, and just as the activity of yeast is invisible, its omission would not be noticed until much later in the process. While most bread recipes call for a whole teaspoon of yeast, often only half is needed, and even though it would take more time, this smaller amount can make for better-tasting bread.

Others who were familiar with the craft of breadmaking noted the function of salt as an inhibitor of the yeast - without it the loaf would collapse. The saying “Truth without love is violence, and love without truth is sentimentality” was brought forward.

**“The Power of Truth”**

I think, if asked for a one-word summary, I would simply describe my previous and first experience of the Gathering as an experience of love.

Now, after my second experience, I want to describe the Gathering as a place where reality of our spirituality meets the experience of our humanity. I think of it as a place where spiritual love strives to be expressed, over the period of one week, through the limits of human community and personality. Last year, perhaps because the Gathering was new to me, the experience of community was profound. It was positively overwhelming. This year, my experience was similar, but there was a also a new and different kind of awareness.

Several times throughout the week, I became aware of a growing concern, expressed in smaller groups and conversations, about the future of Quaker faith. There was concern that communal trust in the guidance of God was lacking, and that the need to wait for it was not being recognized. This concern felt at odds with the overwhelming sense of positivity I witnessed elsewhere, particularly in the two larger group events that I attended - one of the plenaries, and the large Meeting for Worship on the morning of the last day.

The plenary I attended presented an innovative approach in addressing threats to the environment, via the extension of the concept of rights to the natural world. A case was cited in New Zealand where a river was granted the same legal rights as a human being. It is a interesting idea, and very interesting that it has been implemented.

But something didn’t feel right about it. I sat with the idea of extending human rights to the natural world. It occurred to me that rights are a human invention - they don’t exist naturally, which is maybe why the idea feels like an imposition. But then, it does not necessarily follow that it would not be a good idea to try.

I thought about the concept of rights. I thought of it as a necessary legal concept for the social contract, and also as a tool for managing a cultural tendency towards individualism. I wondered that if the concept of rights, as the point of focus, could distract from a lack of community in secular culture, which might be a more pertinent cause of both social and environmental problems. I wondered that, while the concept of rights may be a culturally preferred tool, it might not be a spiritually grounded one. But at this point I was intellectually engaged in the problem of trying to sort this out, and I did not feel spiritually grounded, myself.

I recognized that it was a cerebral response to a gut feeling, but also could not let it go. Not until the next morning, when the leader of my workshop expressed his gratitude for the plenary. He experienced an expression of care for God’s creation, noticing the concern behind the work, and wanting to encourage it. I noticed that when I consider everything - our small Quaker community, the river in New Zealand, and the entire earth - as parts of God’s creation, the internal dispute I was entertaining is silenced.

Throughout the week, I continued to notice and carry the concern about the lack of trust in God’s guidance in our community. At the large Meeting for Worship on the final day, I experienced the concern being played out. With so many cumulative positive and personal experiences, so much hope for the work being done, it is little wonder that there was so much vocal ministry. The sense of community was strong, and I experienced moments of worship. But I did not feel a strong sense of unity. The meeting did not feel gathered, though it did feel generally positive. After about 20 minutes, a Friend stood up to address the lack of spiritual grounded ministry with a reprimand. After few moments of silence, another Friend was moved to reprimand the reprimand.

The need for both truth and love, as noted in my workshop, was evident. It doesn’t feel right to say that love is not enough. But, carrying the concern, I considered that the deeper truth may be that human love is not enough, on its own. But when I consider what the purpose of spiritual love may be, I find that I don’t know it. Or, that to articulate a purpose for it seems to be beyond my ability.

I recall that on the last day of the workshop, we spent time with William Penn’s old imperative, “Let us then try what love will do”. At first, The syntax seemed incorrect - one is tempted to think the language is outdated, that “Let us then *see* what love will do” must have been what was meant. Paul Buckley noted that the choice of is words was likely intentional. The imperative to *try* to love implies that it might not possible to do it perfectly, but that nonetheless, the trying is important. And it is “love” - distinct from our imperfect and specific efforts, that “does”. We may not even get to “see” what is done, or know the purpose of our trying.

Since the Gathering, the question of the purpose of love has come up for me several times. Is the experience of it, through community or personality, a purpose in itself? I know I have believed that, wanting to experience it again. But I also wonder that this may be only my own human purpose, for better or worse.

I do know that, after the tender feelings of being in immersed in community have left, I remain changed by the experience. It affects my awareness of the spirituality of the people around me, the decisions I make, and the also the regrets that I feel. Generally, I feel more able to be open, and also more grounded. It’s as if I can sway more easily, having more solid roots. I can imagine this as a purpose.

I find it difficult to articulate. But if it is true that the affection that we feel for each other in community is not enough on its own, and that trust in God’s love is needed, then yes, part of the power of that truth is the power of mystery. I experienced it at the Gathering, and feel more capable of experiencing it afterwards, along with a deep gratitude for our beloved community.

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